

OFFICE MEMORANDUM

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : Mr. Henry Kearns
Asst. Secretary for International Affairs
ATTN: Mr. John Shepard, Export Policy Staff

FROM : Robert W. Burgess
Director, Bureau of the Census

SUBJECT: Exchange of Census Observers with the U.S.S.R.

The pending proposal for an exchange of population census observers with the U.S.S.R. has much merit and should be supported vigorously by the Department of Commerce and the Bureau of the Census. The principal advantages accruing to the United States from such an exchange are twofold:

1. The opportunity to acquire an improved understanding of Soviet data and data collection processes, thereby enhancing the capability of United States intelligence analysts to make accurate studies and evaluations of demographic and economic situations, trends, and tendencies in the U.S.S.R.
2. The opportunity to become acquainted with the state of development of the art of census-taking and with unique administrative and methodological solutions for more-or-less universal census-taking problems, thereby providing United States statisticians and census technicians with information that may be of value to this country in the formulation of population census plans and programs.

The U.S.S.R. plans to conduct its next population census as of 15 January 1959. This will be the first major census taken there since 1939, and its results -- to the extent that they will be made available -- are bound to be the subject of the most intensive study by all concerned with up-to-date intelligence for the U.S.S.R. Many important studies and evaluations of the population and labor force of the U.S.S.R. now necessarily depend on out-of-date statistics or on figures of more recent vintage whose reliability and accuracy cannot be assessed adequately. Very few of the 1939 census data have been published, for example, and the draft program of the U.S.S.R. Central Statistical Administration for the forthcoming population census calls attention to the dissatisfaction of Soviet authorities with alternative current sources of statistical information. The pervasive effects of World War II in terms of war losses, abnormally curtailed fertility, extensive redistribution of population,

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and related circumstances, casts a veil over the Soviet demographic situation. Not only are main features obscured, but important details are often totally blacked out. This has had an inhibiting effect on the evaluation of current conditions and has made attempts at projection and prediction even more hazardous than would necessarily be the case under conditions of optimum data availability.

Under these circumstances, any feasible opportunity to improve the state of our knowledge of Soviet statistical data on population and manpower ought to be entertained seriously. The fact that the Soviet Union has greatly relaxed its restrictions on the export of statistical data; has already provided us with some plans for the 1959 census, including schedules, enumerators instructions, and similar materials; and has permitted important officials to correspond with us in terms which suggest a willingness to participate in exchanges of technical information on the art of census-taking, seems to make this a propitious time to propose an exchange of census observers.

The role of a census observation team would be to witness the conduct of the census at close range, thus affording opportunities for a superior appreciation of the results which could not be obtained otherwise. This proposal contemplates that United States' observers would be present for a short time prior to the census date and for a few weeks thereafter, and that they would have opportunities to observe operations and to discuss concepts, definitions, field procedures, tabulation processes, ad hoc variations from the plan of operations, and other aspects of the census at all levels, from the field office to the headquarters. In particular, such observers would be enjoined to seek evidence bearing upon subjects such as the following:

1. Completeness of enumeration, population groups likely to be underreported, geographical variation in completeness of coverage, and related topics.
2. Precise meanings of definitions employed and the extent to which these were adhered to in practice.
3. Extent of nonreporting on specific census schedule items, and reasons therefore.
4. Tendencies toward misstatement on subjects such as age, occupation and industry, social class, ethnic group, nationality, etc.
5. Adequacy of provisions for enumerating special population groups, such as institutional inmates, military forces, persons in a travel status, etc.

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6. Effectiveness of pre-census enumeration district inspection and of post-enumeration control tours in reducing error. These devices are not used in the United States.
7. Mapping available to enumerators and problems of boundary delineation.
8. Decentralization of office operations.
9. Tabulation plans and operations.

Under this proposal, it would be most advantageous for the United States' observers to be very experienced in census-taking, to have a good knowledge of the Russian language, and to have some knowledge of Soviet society, geography, economics, and public administration. Since these attributes will rarely be found in a single person, the members of the observer team will have to be selected so that their abilities are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

As their quid pro quo, the Soviets would have the opportunity to observe the 1960 census of the United States, and, if they wished, any earlier pretests that may be held.

Inasmuch as statistical data for the population of the United States have been freely available to the U.S.S.R., as have technical details on our census-taking processes, the potential balance of advantage from the proposed exchange appears to be heavily in favor of the United States. The principal benefit accruing to the Soviet Union would probably be in the area of the use of new high-speed computing machine procedures for tabulation of census data.

The Bureau of the Census is prepared to undertake the role of host to a team of Soviet census observers. The International Statistical Programs Office of the Bureau of the Census has had considerable experience in this role and has in being a staff which could be assigned to the task with relatively little additional preparation or disruption of other activities.

The Director of the Census has already invited all American countries to send census observers to the United States to witness a trial census to be held in mid-October 1958. It would be possible to extend a similar invitation to the U.S.S.R. within the framework of the proposed exchange of census observers. Whether or not this is done, the organizational capability to supervise the activities of a Soviet observation team exists and could be employed during the period of the 1960 census proper.